

# Basic Detail Report

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## Derwent Hunter

**Vessel number**

HV000843

**Date**

1946

**Primary Maker**

Walter Wilson

### Description

Derwent Hunter is a 90ft topsail schooner designed and built by Walter Wilson in 1946. It has a beam of 19ft and a working sail area of 2,400 square ft. The Wilson's of Port Cygnet have been a significant firm in Tasmania's boat and ship building history. John Wilson established a shipbuilding business in 1870, after serving his time as a shipwright with Colin Walker. His sons Walter, Sydney and Tasman Wilson all joined the firm and continued the business. The yard settled permanently at Port Cygnet around 1900. Derwent Hunter was the last vessel designed by Walter Wilson in his eightieth year. Wilson designed Derwent Hunter as a fast sailing vessel that could be used for recreation and as a vessel that initially had as its singular purpose the supply of fish to a restaurant at Wrest Point. Its design was inspired by the Grand Banks fishing schooners of Canada and the north east of the United States of America, and it was initially rigged as a Bermuda ketch. It was built of Blue Gum, Tasmanian Oak, Celery Top Pine, and Huon Pine. The construction was carried out over 18 months and all by hand tools, with the final fit out done in Hobart. The early sail trading ketches built in Tasmania were a major part of that state's maritime workforce, and the Wilson's boat building and design company spans the history of these sailing ketches through to their conversion to motor vessels during the 1930's. In recent times the Wilson family has continued design and building work through grandsons Keith, Alan and Noel Wilson, working with projects for yachts and launches as well as fishing boats and other similar craft. In 1950 the CSIRO purchased Derwent Hunter for 12,000 pounds to work as an oceanographic research vessel and renamed it F.R.V Derwent Hunter. The vessels fish well was sheathed to provide for a laboratory, scientists' accommodation, store and freezer. It was also converted as a gaff rigged schooner. F.R.V Derwent Hunter followed on from CSIRO's chartering of the Danish seine trawler F.R.V Liawenee in June 1948 for school shark and barracouta investigations at sea. F.R.V Liawenee operated for just over a year before mechanical problems forced the need for more effective vessel. Derwent Hunter operated under distinctive red sails, and was used in a range of projects including shark tagging and drop line fishing for deep sea trevally from 1950 to 1955. Many of Derwent Hunter's research publications from this period are held by CSIRO including 'Planktological Investigations made by the F.R.V Derwent Hunter in Eastern Australian Waters, 1952-1954'. The F.R.V Derwent Hunter was pivotal in the development of the conductivity temperature depth (CTD) oceanographic instrument, a probe used to measure continuous records of temperature and salinity. The trials for this instrument were undertaken on the vessel on 29 April 1955. The winches aboard F.R.V Derwent Hunter and more broadly

the design of the vessel aided greatly in lowering the prototype CTD's, a process that was not as easy for larger naval research vessels. CSIRO physicist Bruce V Hamon recalls the CTD sea trials aboard F.R.V Derwent Hunter: "You might think that having tested the CTD on the tiny Derwent Hunter we should not have been so easily stumped in getting suitable winches on to the huge navy ships! I have no short answer for that one - but it certainly was a problem at the time" And on some of the slightly less appealing components of the vessel: "I recall lying in the scientist's bunk in a moderate seaway, listening to the tins of food on the galley shelves next door going clickety-clack to one end as she rolled to port then the same sound as she rolled back. And the cook's unprintable comments when the whole meal hit the deck as a result of a particularly savage motion. The worst feature of the Derwent Hunter was that the only heads on board were far forward and accessible only from the open deck" The Derwent Hunter was highly regarded for its work between 1953 and 1955, when it carried out a varied program of fisheries and oceanographic work most countries would have not attempted with such a small vessel. Its most ambitious cruise was to Lord Howe Island and New Caledonia in 1955. From 1949-1955 Roy Downie was captain of Derwent Hunter. During this period he enabled his scientific colleagues to establish life biological facts on barracouta and school sharks, achieved success with tuna longlining, found oily pilchards via echo sounding, and improved the technique of bottom longlining. Between 1956 and 1959 Derwent Hunter was engaged in oceanographic studies in the Coral Sea and hydrography and plankton studies in the Tasman Sea. It operated as far north as Noumea and the outer Pacific Basin. An extinct volcanic seamount of the Tasmantid Seamount Chain - Derwent Hunter Guyot - is named after the vessel. Prio to being sold in 1962 Derwent Hunter was used for tuna longlining off NSW, Victorian and Tasmanian coasts. In 1969 and 1970 Derwent Hunter featured in the Australian Television series The Rovers as 'Pacific Lady' a vessel that cruised the east coast of Australia and documented local wildlife. Following this, Derwent Hunter was available for hire for blue water sailing, deep sea fishing, or recreational parties on the Hawkesbury River. Derwent Hunter's operation from 1970 on is covered by Graeme Broxam in his publication 'Those that Survive': Derwent Hunter was reputed to have been running guns to Timor after the Indonesian invasion in 1975. In November of that year the vessel was reported overdue with 11 people on board while on a voyage from Bali to Darwin. However, a few days later, following an extensive air and sea search, it was located becalmed some 480 km west of its intended destination. In 1977 Hobart commercial fisherman Bern Cuthbertson discovered Derwent Hunter at Cairns in a very dilapidated state and purchased it 'as was.' The craft returned to Tasmania where it received a very major refit including 35 new planks and a new engine. Cuthbertson was never very pleased with its sea-keeping abilities, however; being 73ft on deck on a 40ft keel, Derwent Hunter plunges into every sea and the water running across its decks could wash an unwary crewman from one end to the other. More recent owners have spoken quite highly of the vessel; no doubt, it's all a matter of working within the basic capabilities of the ship. Derwent Hunter was advertised for sale in 1984 and 1986 and has since had several owners in Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland, where in the 1990s until January 2020 it operated as a charter vessel out of Airlie Beach. Of note, in 1998 the vessel was part of the Tall Ships Australia celebration. With its owner eyeing retirement, Derwent Hunter was advertised for sale in 2018 for \$700,000, and returned to Hobart for the first time in many years early in March 2020, still seeking a new owner. Later in the year it returned to Queensland and has recently undergone hull work at Brisbane. Early in 2021 new owners proposed using Derwent Hunter as a Cairns-based training ship for Indigenous youth. Since 2021 Derwent Hunter has been operating in the

Whitsundays as an adventure and eco tourism vessel. Through the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority Derwent Hunter has participated in marine research programs, indicating its ongoing engagement in oceanographic research and conservation. Entry compiled with the assistance of Graeme Broxam at the Wooden Boat Guild of Tasmania For further detail on Derwent Hunter's operation as an oceanographic research vessel refer to Vivienne Mawson. David J. Tranter and Alan F. Pearce, CSIRO at Sea: 50 Years of Marine Science, (CSIRO Marine Laboratories: 1988), and for its operational history refer to Graeme Broxam and Nicole Mayes 'Those that Survive: Tasmania's Vintage and Veteran Commercial and Government Vessels'